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Mobile Podcasting: Do students have the kit in their pockets and are they willing to use it?

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Information Sheet

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I'd like to thank Vic Jenkins and Geraldine Jones from the e-learning Team at the University of Bath for their comments and thoughts on previous versions.

Introduction

The aims of this paper are to answer the following questions: what is mobile podcasting? can students participate with the devices in their pockets? and are they willing to participate in mobile podcasting for their learning? The answers to these questions are drawn from a recent cross-institutional survey. The findings imply they do have the technology, however, there are questions around if they are willing to participate given it will cost them money.

Background

As context, mobile podcasting is where an individual participates in podcasting (a series of digital media files - either audio or video) that are released episodically and downloaded through web syndication (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Podcast> accessed: 11th Jan, 2010) using their mobile device (usually a phone). The emphasis is on using a mobile device to create the digital media file and uploading this to a web service for distribution, as well as using the mobile device as a podcatcher (RSS aggregator) to

subscribe and download the media file, and play it on the mobile devices media player.

So what are the advantages of mobile podcasting?

There is growing interest in the application of mobile podcasting to situated learning, for instance the use in field work or professional development. These learning environments offer the option of capturing and listening to podcasts on a mobile device. The completion of an authentic learning task is significantly more effective as a learning activity when you are in the location compared to when using a desktop (location static) computer. Application of mobile learning is evident from recent presentations at the Media Enhanced Learning SIG events. These included student created podcasts as part of student portfolios in Teacher Training at the University of Wolverhampton, and the use of mobile podcasting within Digital Storytelling at the Universities of Gloucestershire and Bath (<http://ppp.chester.ac.uk/> accessed: 12th January, 2010).

From a technical perspective mobile podcasting is relative simple when using a modern mobile phone. The majority of mobile phones include the capability to capture video and/or audio. They include a multimedia player, and offer excellent connectivity via GPRS and wi-fi to upload and download multimedia files. Many include RSS aggregation software which allows you to subscribe to podcasts, or a web browser if you wish to access the file via a more traditional download route. However, do students have the kit in their pockets and are they willing to use it?

Methodology

A cross-institutional student survey was deployed during November and December 2009. This survey was part of a wider investigation into student awareness of QR Codes (<http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/qrcode>). The institutions involved were the University of Bath, University of Leicester, University of Sheffield and the University of Gloucestershire. The survey was promoted at each institution differently, and the response rates differed accordingly. Consequently, the results need to be interpreted against the background of a small, self-selecting sample population.

Findings and discussion

There were 2765 responses, of which 51% were female and 49% male. The age breakdown indicates 75.6% of people were 18-22, and 16.3% were between 23-29. The rest 30 or over.

It is proposed that, for a student to participate in mobile podcasting, they need a mobile device with the appropriate software (multimedia player, RSS subscription software, web browser, audio and video creation software), and good connectivity (data tariffs, and/or wireless). A good proxy for these requirements are ownership of a camera phone and a phone with wi-fi capabilities. The rationale being a camera phone is likely to be able to capture video and include a video player. If they can capture video they are likely to be able to capture audio. While wi-fi capable phones are likely

to include web browsers, and RSS aggregators. When asked, 93.3% responded they owned a camera phone (n=2736) and 51.6% owned a wi-fi enabled phone (n=2736). These findings imply the vast majority of students are capable of both playing and recording multimedia on their devices. While 1 in every 2 own a mobile phone which can connect to the internet. Further probing about connectivity identified 1 in 3 respondents have a data package included in their mobile telephone plan (n=2735). Interestingly, 1 in 3 respondents are not sure if their telephone plan includes a data tariff.

It can be concluded, from a technical perspective a large number of people can participate in mobile podcasting. The next question is, are they willing to? The suggestion from the respondents is they are not willing to use their own money to access learning materials on their mobile phone. When asked, on a scale of 1 to 5, how likely are you to spend your own money on accessing learning materials on your mobile phone? The largest group (37.8%) of respondents was very unlikely (n=2743). The breakdown of responses was:

1 (very likely)	4.5%
2	12.6%
3 (neutral)	21.1%
4	24.0%
5 (very unlikely)	37.8%

This indicates nearly 1 out of every 2 students are not willing (or likely) to spend their own money to access learning materials (such as podcasts) on their devices. This increased to 82.9% (4 out of every 5) if you include the neutral group. When responses to the technical capabilities questions were filtered by the "very unlikely group", it was evident this group had similar patterns in terms of camera phone ownership, data plans and wi-fi capable phones. When the whole group were asked to explain their answers, many preferred to use readily available computers (which are quicker, more usable and perceived as free).

Conclusions

These responses suggest a number of important lessons for those wishing to promote mobile podcasting with their students. Firstly, it is not so much a technical barrier as an economic and awareness barrier. Students do own the technology, and they will be increasingly able to participate via data plans and wi-fi networks. However, they currently do not perceive they wish to spend their own money on accessing learning materials on a phone. It should be noted this statement needs to be further unpacked as many students are not aware they have a data tariff and what the data tariff translates to in terms of costs for them to access learning materials. Therefore, it could be argued for some students there is a "fear of a perceived cost rather than the reality of the situation" (credit - Vic Jenkins). This would act as a barrier to using their own device for participating in mobile podcasting. The results imply there is more work which needs to be undertaken to get a better understanding of the factors influencing student participation. This should involve the use of focus groups and structured interviews.

Where does this leave us, the academic who is keen to promote mobile podcasting?

The short answer is the academic needs to be aware of the issues previously raised when designing and implementing the activity. There is a need for a dialogue with students around expectations and benefits so they can decide if they wish to participate. Also, students need to be encouraged to investigate what connectivity options they currently have with their device and phone plans. There is also a need for clear supporting documentation to help students overcome the technical barriers associated with using their phone and people need to work to facilitate a community of practice within the cohort (both online and face to face) so they can support and develop each other. With the right support networks in place, "if an educator devised what a group of students perceived to be a sufficiently valuable learning activity involving mobile podcasting then most would be willing to have a go" (credit - Geraldine Jones)

References

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